

W. A. Mozart
Così fan tutte

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I *Introduction*

Towards the end of December 1789 Mozart sent a note to his friend, creditor and fellow Freemason, Michael Puchberg, inviting him to a private rehearsal of a new opera he had written for Vienna's court theatre:

Next month I will receive from the directorate (according to the current arrangement) 200 ducats for my opera; if you can and will lend me 400 florins until then, you will lift your friend from the greatest embarrassment, and I give you my word of honour that you will have the money back at the appointed time in cash and in full, with all my thanks. . . [After cancelling an engagement for the next day:] But I invite you (and you alone) to my apartment at 10 in the morning on Thursday [the 31st] for a little opera rehearsal – I'm inviting only you and Haydn. . .¹

One reason for this invitation (as also a later one, to the first orchestral rehearsal) was to impress Puchberg that Mozart was in fact producing works that would bring in money with which to repay him for past and future loans. But the presence of Haydn, whose opinion Mozart respected greatly, is an indication of the composer's pride in his new opera, *Così fan tutte*, and that musical enjoyment was the main reason for the invitation. Mozart's stance towards the work – the last of three operas created in collaboration with Lorenzo Da Ponte – is a matter of some importance, as several early critics attempted to distance the composer from his librettist's text, in order to remove what they considered to be a blot on his reputation. Already in 1791 a correspondent for the *Annalen des Theaters*, reporting on a performance in Frankfurt, called the opera 'a miserable Italian product with the powerful, sublime music of a Mozart'.² The Bohemian Franz Xaver Németschek (Niemetschek), otherwise one of Mozart's warmest supporters, wondered how the composer could 'waste his heavenly sweet melodies on such a miserable and clumsy text'.³ And somewhat later, the Russian critic Aleksandr Ulybyshev wrote of Mozart having faced the dilemma

of having either to set an 'uncomposable' text, or consciously to ignore much of what Da Ponte had created.⁴

From a modern perspective, such views hardly seem comprehensible, for *Così fan tutte* is now generally acknowledged to be a masterpiece of comic invention, in which disturbing psychological issues are probed at least as deeply as in the prior collaborations of its authors. Some basic facts about the opera can be singled out as contributing to the puzzlement of some spectators and critics. The supposed lack of a model text has left Da Ponte more vulnerable to criticism than in the cases of his Beaumarchais-derived *Figaro*, and of *Don Giovanni*, which was based on a libretto by Bertati, and a long theatrical tradition before that. More so than those works, *Così* also demands a listener well versed in the history of operatic conventions, and with a fine sensitivity to irony. Most crucially, the 'philosophy' voiced in *Così* belongs to a world-view that was already on the wane when the opera was new. As both Daniel Hertz and Andrew Steptoe have suggested, the fine shades of distinction in *Così* between various types or stages of romantic involvement, and the elaborate pairings and repairings of the four lovers are much as one finds in the plays and novels of Marivaux, in the first half of the century.⁵ One might also draw an analogy to the painter Fragonard, whose art encompasses far more than the rococo frivolity critics have mostly seen in it, and whose reputation is only now undergoing a thorough rehabilitation.

Attempts such as Da Ponte's to reconcile love with reason lost much of their credibility in the nineteenth century, which ushered in more rigid views of bourgeois morality and new constructions of sexual roles. The mockery in *Così* of fidelity in love, by the philosophical Alfonso and the worldly-wise Despina, was not likely to encounter open sympathy in the Vienna of Joseph II's successors, at a time when personal and political freedoms were coming to be equated with radical notions emanating from Revolutionary France. *Così fan tutte* is comparable to *Die Zauberflöte*, in that both are statements of allegiance to a world-order under attack. Both operas' librettists firmly place their faith in 'reason': Da Ponte in the motto of his final chorus, Schikaneder in allusions to the tenets of Freemasonry, whose adherents were then being persecuted in Vienna. In this respect, a 1791 pamphlet entitled *Anti-da Ponte* is revealing in its ridicule of Da Ponte for clinging to the memory of the dead Emperor Joseph in an attempt to retain his own position as theatre-poet.

Even after the plot of *Così* had lost some of its shock value, spectators were hard pressed to fit the opera into a Mozart canon that emphasized the imposing and the tragic: the late symphonies, the minor-mode piano concertos, *Don Giovanni* and *Die Zauberflöte*. At the start of the twentieth century, *Così fan tutte* was revived as something of a connoisseur's opera – indeed, the nature of Da Ponte's text gives much basis for such a view. But it was principally the music, and not the plot, that was that the object of revival and of critical attention. The same Edward Dent who called *Così*'s libretto 'as perfect. . . as any composer could desire' nevertheless declared that in the dénouement it made no difference at all '[w]hether the ladies pair off with their original lovers or their new ones'.⁶ Not until 1954 was any serious attempt made to come to grips with the basic material of the plot and its sources.⁷ The discovery that these lay in Greek myths and Italian literary classics has done much to stimulate further research on its text, as well as more thoughtful productions of the opera.

‘. . .dramma che tiene il terzo loco. . .’

Così fan tutte is more intimately bound up with the other two products of Mozart's collaboration with Da Ponte than is often realized. The librettist's own characterization of *Così* in his memoirs as a 'drama which holds third place among the sisters born of that most celebrated father of harmony' (Mozart) clearly links it with these other works.⁸ But this formulation also seems evasive, even deprecating; for Da Ponte, the work's title was not even *Così fan tutte*, but rather *La scuola* [or *scola*] *degli amanti*. There was good reason for this circumspection: Da Ponte intended his memoirs for a public consisting primarily of his own female students of Italian, who no doubt would be scandalized by a phrase such as 'così fan tutte', and by any explanation of its premise.⁹ But to a Viennese public that knew both titles, the first of them would immediately have called to mind a phrase sung by Basilio in *Le nozze di Figaro*. As Count Almaviva discovers Cherubino hiding in a chair in Susanna's room, the cynical music master observes: 'Così fan tutte le belle, / Non c'è alcuna novità' (All women do that; there's nothing new about it). Mozart drives home the connection by quoting Basilio's musical motif in the first theme of the Presto section of *Così*'s overture (see Examples 1.1a–b):

4 *W. A. Mozart: Così fan tutte*

Example 1.1a

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Basilio

Co - si fan tut - te le bel - le;

non c'è al - cu - na no - vi - tà.

Example 1.1b

29 ob. 1

fl.

ob. 1 (bsn 1 all'8va)

fl.

This trill-motif found its way also into the first finale of *Figaro*, where it is used to ironic effect: Susanna, having stepped out of her mistress's closet and confounded the count's suspicions concerning his wife and Cherubino, spurns his request to help calm her ire with the words 'Così si condanna chi può sospettar' (Thus is condemned one who is capable of suspicion).¹⁰ Through this and further uses of the motif, it acquires the ability to communicate – and warn against – suspicion and jealousy. Thus its use in the overture of *Così* suggests that suspicion will figure prominently in the plot of this opera too. The motif's reappearance at the end of the third trio, just before the first change of scene, is doubly significant. As Ferrando and Guglielmo (abetted by Don Alfonso) confidently sing of the toasts they will make to Cupid once their wager is won and their women proven faithful, the whole orchestra takes up the trill, simultaneously depicting inebriation and mocking their certainty. By the time the officers actually do participate in a toast, in the second finale, they have lost their bet.

The theme of jealousy and its musical signifier were not the only means by which Mozart and his librettist encouraged spectators to associate *Così fan tutte* with *Le nozze di Figaro*. At several points they included textual or musical echoes of the earlier opera, clearly hoping to profit from its recent success with the Viennese public. The military chorus ‘Bella vita militar’, for example, returned to the spirit and subject matter of Figaro’s aria ‘Non più andrai, farfallone amoroso’. One prominently set text in *Così* amounted to an inversion of the sense of similar lines in *Figaro*. Susanna, while dressing up Cherubino in female garb as bait for the count (in No. 12 of the score), admires his youthful beauty, saying

Se l’amano le femmine,
Han certo il lor perchè.

(If women love him, they certainly have their reasons.)

Guglielmo, consoling the cuckolded Ferrando as best he can by saying that he is not alone in his predicament, ends his aria ‘Donne mie, la fate a tanti’ (No. 26) with a similarly worded couplet:

Che se gridano gli amanti
Hanno certo un gran perchè.

(For if lovers complain, they certainly have good reason.)

Guglielmo’s aria is resonant also with Figaro’s horn-accompanied warning to men concerning feminine cunning, ‘Aprite un po’ quegl’occhi’ (likewise No. 26), and with other models to be discussed in Chapter 4.

In broader ways, too (traceable to a common origin in the *commedia dell’arte*), *Così fan tutte* clearly hearkens back to *Figaro* and to *Don Giovanni*. In the first place, all three operas are largely concerned with masks and disguises. In *Così* the officers’ exotic garb gives them licence to indulge in amorous conduct not normally tolerated – with unintended consequences. Serenades are another feature common to the three Mozart/Da Ponte operas. These are used by the well-coached peasants in Act I of *Figaro*, by the *contadine* in Act III and by Susanna in the fourth-act garden scene of that opera, and by or for Don Giovanni at several points in the opera bearing his name. All these pieces, as well as Ferrando’s promise of a serenade to his faithful beloved in No. 3 of *Così*, and the false Albanians’ serenade in No. 21, reflect a general craze for such music among Viennese of the time.¹¹ Also not to be overlooked

among the threads linking the three operas are the complaints of the servants Leporello and Despina (and Figaro's, of a quite different order), and the threatened swordplay between Alfonso and the young officers at the beginning of *Così* – a comic echo of the fatal duel at the start of *Don Giovanni*.

An alternative trilogy

The conspicuous lessons in relations between the sexes in these operas moved Hertz to term them 'Three Schools for Lovers', after Da Ponte's subtitle for *Così*. In each opera the men emerge chastened; the same could be said of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, on account of its second-act finale. (In *Così fan tutte* the women act out with the 'Albanians' precisely what Belmonte and Pedrillo had suspected their women of doing with the Turks.) But a slightly different trio of operas given in Vienna might with equal logic be termed 'Three Schools for Lovers': Paisiello's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (performed in 1783), *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Così fan tutte*. The first two works, after plays by Beaumarchais, offer rather closer thematic and musical parallels to *Così* than does *Don Giovanni*. The lessons of the latter (Masetto's aside) are concerned with gross violations of the social code, rather than the more delicate matter of trust. *Il barbiere* and *Figaro*, on the other hand, quickly focus on the acute psychological torment experienced by 'one capable of suspicion' (*chi può sospettar*). 'Quelle rage a-t-on d'apprendre ce qu'on craint toujours de savoir!' (What a fury one is in to find out what one always fears to know!), Bartholo mutters to himself in Beaumarchais's *Barbier de Séville*, as he furtively reads a letter he has snatched from his young pupil Rosine. Paisiello and his librettist (usually said to be Giuseppe Petrosellini) let this moment pass quickly in recitative, but Da Ponte and Mozart seized upon the similarly disquieting lines in the opening scene of *Le Mariage de Figaro*, and amplified them in a musical number. In telling Figaro 'Discaccia i sospetti / Che torto mi fan' (Chase away your suspicions which do me wrong), in the duettino, No. 2, Susanna repeats 'sospetti' three times over, which only augments his anxieties. It is just such torment that Alfonso tells his friends not to go courting, in the opening scene of *Così*. Echoing Susanna, the officers protest that Alfonso does their women wrong ('. . .che torto le fa'); the difference is that in this opera the women do give in.

Da Ponte's debt to the French dramatist extended also to matters of technique. In *Le Barbier de Séville* Beaumarchais takes a fairly

common practice – the use of a play’s title or subtitle within the text itself – and carries it to unprecedented lengths. The characters refer more than a dozen times to a fictitious *drame* called *La Précaution inutile*, which phrase Beaumarchais also used as the subtitle of his own comedy. The phrase is sometimes used complete (as at the end, where it is printed in italics), sometimes only allusively; in any case the repeated mentions of Bartholo’s ‘vain precautions’ against seducers bring the audience into complicity with the playwright.¹² Da Ponte seems to have taken Beaumarchais’s example as a challenge, for he too integrated his title – itself an explanation of why precautions are useless – into the architecture of his text. Just before the second finale Alfonso sings the motto ‘Cosi fan tutte’ didactically to his friends, who repeat it back to him. Mozart placed the same music near the beginning of the overture, expecting that auditors would recognize its significance. The critic Friedrich Rochlitz, writing in 1801, certainly did; he described the phrase as ‘the signature of the whole, so plainly stated, as if it were piped from a tower. Can one mistake it? Could one do this any more beautifully?’¹³ In addition to these two framing statements of the title, the one textless, the other verbatim, there are prominently placed versions which present it in different conjugations. At the end of her second-act aria Dorabella tells her sister to follow Cupid’s dictates, ‘che anch’io farò cosi’ (for I shall do so too). A few scenes later Alfonso, too, hints at the motto, just before singing it, as he asks the men ‘Ma l’altre, che faran, se ciò fer queste?’ (But what will other women do, if these ones did this?). There is even what would appear to be a reference to the subtitle of *Il barbiere*. Concerning Despina’s suggestion that they receive the two strangers, Dorabella asks her sister: ‘Che imbroglia nascer deve / Con tanta precauzion?’ (What trouble could arise, with so much precaution?) The opera’s title, and the subtitle of Paisiello’s opera before that, tell the audience that these precautions, too, will be useless.

It was natural enough that Da Ponte would imitate a prominent device from an opera that had been phenomenally popular with the Viennese public. But the Beaumarchais operas were neither the sole, nor even most important impulse behind the creation of *Cosi fan tutte* – whose text (as shall be seen) was offered initially to Salieri, not Mozart. Internal evidence points to a main source in one of the supreme landmarks of Italian literature – a body of work that Da Ponte spent much of his later career promoting, in England and America. What Da Ponte made of this source, and the degree to which Mozart’s music seconded his intentions, will occupy us in several of the chapters to come.